

# *Images of Indestructible Israel: Raïssa Maritain on Marc Chagall*

Judith D. Suther

In a six-thousand-word essay entitled “Marc Chagall” written in New York in 1942 and slightly revised in Rome in 1947, Raïssa Maritain says that her compatriot is “a primitive of the race of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> She is referring to his painting style and to his Jewishness. For her, to call Chagall a Jewish artist was not enough; he was a painter whose images of “indestructible Israel” bridge the Old and New Testaments.<sup>2</sup> She did not simply appreciate and admire his work, as a student or collector or a sympathetic critic might do. She saw in it a visual record of the joys and sufferings of the Jewish people. She also saw signs of deliverance in the Christ figures who appear alongside the musicians, lovers, animals, and rabbis, all, in her words, “capsized in

---

At the first draft stage of this paper, my colleague Bruce S. Gartner generously answered my questions about traditional religious symbols and rituals of Judaism. I am grateful to him for helping me clarify some initially vague impressions about Chagall’s iconography.

<sup>1</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Marc Chagall* (New York: Éditions de la Maison Française, 1943), 125. *Chagall ou l’orage enchanté* (Geneva: Éditions des Trois Collines, 1948). *Chagall ou l’orage enchanté—Chagall or the Magical Storm*—is the title of the revised version of the essay.

This unique and charming book has long been out of print. Cornelia Borgerhoff gave me her copy at the Princeton train station after we had spent parts of two days talking about the Maritains. Only when I was on the train headed back to New York did I notice that the book had been inscribed in Raïssa’s hand to Mercédès and Jean Labatut. Jean Labatut was the architect of the Stuart Country Day School of the Sacred Heart in Princeton, the school that houses the Raïssa Maritain Memorial Library. When the Labatuts died, their copy of *Chagall ou l’orage enchanté* must have come to Nini Borgerhoff. It is characteristic of her to have passed the book on.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 56.

the magical storm” of the painter’s canvases. Her vivid inner pictures of indestructible Israel and the suffering Christ merged, I suspect, in the deeper recesses of her contemplative life.

The extreme subjectivity and passion of Raïssa’s response to Chagall have earned her no points from official custodians of art. Sidney Alexander, Chagall’s American biographer, dismisses her assessment as “a compost of incense and insight,”<sup>3</sup> “perspicacious yet sentimental.”<sup>4</sup> For incense, read “Catholic hocus-pocus” and for sentimental, read “amateurish,” and you have an idea of how seriously Raïssa’s writing on Chagall has been taken by professionals. They scorned her for what she was (a fervent Catholic exiled in an anti-Catholic culture) and for what she was not (an assimilated Jew who had no business proffering opinions on an unassimilated one).

If the incense-and-sentimentality view is patronizing, it is also irrelevant to the occasional nature of Raïssa’s essay on Chagall. Above all, she was reacting to the work of a fellow Russian Jew who, like herself, had emigrated from Ukraine to France and, shortly before the essay was written, had taken uneasy refuge in the United States. For her, Chagall’s images evoked their common origins in small-town Jewish life in the pre-revolutionary Russian empire, and the destruction of that life by the anti-Semitic, totalitarian regimes of this century. Only marginally interested in the formal questions that occupied professional art commentators, and unarmed with their technical vocabulary, she was drawn to the narrative content of Chagall’s work. She saw in his wandering Jews and crucified Christs a visionary messianism joining Judaic and Christian history. In “Marc Chagall” (1943), the original version of the essay, and *Chagall ou l’orage enchanté* (1948), the revised edition, she gives an intensely personal account of how art enters the individual consciousness. As such accounts are bound to do, hers reveals as much about the person observing as about the work being observed.

I do not propose to endorse or take issue with what Raïssa says about Chagall in either edition of the essay. Instead, I will make a brief comparison between her comments and those of an art historian who was her contemporary, James Johnson Sweeney. By this means

---

<sup>3</sup>Sidney Alexander, *Marc Chagall: A Biography* (New York: Putnam, 1978), 307.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 309.

I hope to show in the simplest and most direct way that not only the degree but also the nature of Raïssa's response to Chagall differs from that of writers "in the trade." Then I will offer some observations on how the wartime "Marc Chagall" and the postwar *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté* reflect back onto Raïssa as well as outward onto Chagall.

### *The Three Themes*

In order to give an idea of how Raïssa expressed her experience of Chagall's work, I will quote excerpts from three main themes of the essay: Chagall as a visionary who makes over natural forms into supernatural ones, Chagall as a Jewish artist, and Chagall as a poet on canvas. These excerpts represent fairly specific observations that Raïssa applies to the artist's work as a whole:

Chagall suffers from any raw representation of things, be it realistic-naturalistic or realistic-abstract. It's not that he avoids natural forms; he doesn't reject them—on the contrary, he possesses them by the love he bears them, but in so doing, he transforms and transfigures them, shakes loose and abstracts from them their own surreality, and from their very heart takes the symbols of joy and life in their purified essence, in their spiritual soul. . . .<sup>5</sup>

The tender, spiritual joy that permeates his work was born with him in Vitebsk, on Russian soil, on Jewish soil. It is thus shot through with melancholy, pierced with the thorn of nostalgia and difficult hope. In truth, Jewish joy is like no other. . . .<sup>6</sup> The Jewish fiancée weeps under the nuptial canopy. The little dancing Jew does not forget his wretchedness; while dancing, he mocks it and accepts it as his divine lot. If he sings, he sighs; for he carries the past sufferings of his people, and his soul is bathed in prophetic intimations of the unimaginable sorrows in store for him.<sup>7</sup>

With his deep, instinctive knowledge of the soul of his people, with his love of life, poetry is the great animator, the great purifier of Chagall's work. Each of his paintings . . . is alive with the shimmer of poetry and appeals to the depths of our being, draws us into an intimate dialogue . . . We forget that poetry is not only in the art of the poet; it is also in the soul of things.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Marc Chagall*, 49.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 62.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 63.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 79.

By way of contrast, I will quote from the concluding paragraph of Sweeney's introduction to the exhibit catalog of the Chagall show at the Museum of Modern Art in New York held in the spring of 1946. In this passage Sweeney writes of the same topics dealt with by Raïssa in the excerpts just quoted. Like her, he refers to specific characteristics of Chagall's paintings, which then assume a broader application to his work over several decades:

Chagall is a conscious artist. While the selection and combination of his images may appear illogical from a representational viewpoint, they are carefully and rationally chosen elements for the pictorial structure he seeks to build. There is nothing automatic in his work. In fact his much talked of illogicality appears only when his paintings are read detail by detail; taken in the composite they have the same pictorial integrity as the most naturalistic painting, or the most architectural cubist work of the same level of quality. He is an artist with a full color sense. He has a deep regard for technique. He is a subtle craftsman who, rather than dull his hand in virtuosity, affects clumsiness. He is an artist who has been content with a limited repertory of representational forms. . . . In an age that has fled from sentiment he has drawn constantly on it for his stimulation. And our debt to Chagall is to an artist who has brought poetry back into painting through subject matter, without any sacrifice of his painter's interest in the picture itself, and entirely aside from any communication that can be put into words.<sup>9</sup>

Unavoidably, I have done violence to both these texts by excerpting them. Yet even these extracts point up the enormous distance between Raïssa's approach to Chagall and that of a trained art historian. The purpose of each text, of course, accounts in part for the contrasting focus and style. The first edition of Raïssa's essay was written soon after the Chagalls arrived in New York in June 1941. To help promote the artist's work, Jacques had arranged with the newly established Éditions de la Maison Française for a short book on him, to be written by Raïssa. The second edition, prepared in Rome after the war, differs dramatically from the first, but only in design and number of illustrations. The New York edition has seven; *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté* has 137 illustrations, including eight in color. The text,

---

<sup>9</sup>James Johnson Sweeney, *Marc Chagall* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1946), 71.

however, is reprinted with only minor changes. It retains the wholly subjective emphasis on Chagall's poetic transformation of images from his childhood.

Sweeney's commentary, on the other hand, is part of the explanatory material for a large Chagall show at Museum of Modern Art in New York City the year after the war ended. He is writing as the curator of a major exhibit, for a broad spectrum of readers, from fellow professionals to drop-in visitors to the museum. The cool tone of the piece contrasts sharply with the unabashed empathy of Raïssa's; the same can be said of his concentration on the painter's craft, on "the picture itself," as opposed to her interest in what she repeatedly calls "soul." Although René Schwob had published a short book in 1931 entitled *Chagall et l'âme juive* (*Chagall and the Jewish Soul*),<sup>10</sup> and Raïssa had surely read it, her use of the term is far more topical than his—in the years between 1931 and the end of World War II, the Anschluss and the Holocaust had profoundly altered the lens through which she looked at the world. Marina Zito puts the matter well when she says that in *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté*, Raïssa reads Chagall's pictures "*dal di dentro*" ("from the inside"). Despite "the absence in Chagall of a denunciation of the Holocaust," Zito points out, Raïssa specifically likens the faces of his musicians, beggars, and rabbis to the faces of some Polish Jews she had seen in a photograph taken just before they were killed, in Raïssa's words, "*par les bourreaux de la 'race supérieure'*" ("by the hangmen of the 'superior race'").<sup>11</sup> For Raïssa, connections such as these permeate Chagall's work and constitute its legitimacy—its truth, she would say. For Sweeney and for art historians in general, such connections are best left to the individual viewer.

### *The View "From Inside"*

Raïssa's view of Chagall "from the inside" clearly derives from her deep, even visceral identification with her own Jewish origins. Her Catholic convert's response to his images also comes from a deep inner source. Long before she wrote on Chagall, her acquired

---

<sup>10</sup>René Schwob, *Marc Chagall et l'âme Juive* (Paris: Correa, 1931).

<sup>11</sup>Marina Zito, *Gli Anni di Meudon: Jacques e Raïssa Maritain tra il 1923 e il 1939* (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1990), 52.

Christian culture, like her acquired language of French, had become second nature to her. Since the early years following her conversion, she had had a tendency to read a messianic element into the life stories of questing Jews, from the Apostle Paul to Henri Bergson to her own parents. It was inevitable that her imagination would be captured not only by the explicit Jewish imagery in Chagall's work, but also by the crucifixion scenes and Christ figures. Although I certainly can't prove it, I suspect that some of her choices for illustrations in *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté* were guided by the narrative and compositional use of Christ figures. There is no question that such figures recur in Chagall's work in all media throughout his long career; he often uses them as decorative motifs, as Slavic artisans had done for centuries. The question worth reflecting upon here is Raïssa's attraction to the figures as Chagall depicts them—one might almost say, the gravitational pull they exercised on her.

In the section of her essay headed "*Un Christ étendu à travers un monde perdu*" ("Christ Spread Out Across a Lost World"), Raïssa writes of her attraction to the suffering Christ as depicted by Chagall. In *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté* the section is set off as a chapter highlighting the 1938 painting, *White Crucifixion*. This painting inaugurates the series of crucifixion canvases in which, according to Alexander, "the central symbol of Christianity is used to cry out the artist's anguish over the Nazi persecution of the Jews."<sup>12</sup> Here is what Raïssa writes:

To find nothing but pain and tears, one must come to a relatively recent work, the Christ that Chagall has depicted at the center of a painting of pogroms, the Christ spread out across a lost world, in a great ivory space. The Jewish lamp is at his feet. In the sky a group of Jews mourns. Sorrow without solace. Synagogues are burning, Jews are fleeing to the four corners of the earth. No one is calling them. Only the compassion of the crucified one shines through, taking on their suffering. The great beauty of this painting seems to me unique in Chagall's work.<sup>13</sup>

If other commentators on Chagall have so passionately singled out this painting, I have not found their writings. For Raïssa, *White Crucifixion* appears to have intensified the experience of Christ's Passion that she

---

<sup>12</sup>Alexander, *Marc Chagall*, 311.

<sup>13</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté*, 113–14.

chronicles in her journal throughout the 1930s. She had a highly developed visual sense, as indicated not only by her interest in painting, but also by some of her odder habits, such as cutting out and gazing at pictures of idealized children from American magazines in the 1950s. This pleasure seems to have put her in direct touch with the simplicity of spirit she always longed for; in like fashion, Chagall's simplified, schematic depiction of the Christ figure in *White Crucifixion* appears to have allowed her unmediated participation in Christ's suffering.

The section "Christ Spread Out Across a Lost World" in *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté* closes with a discussion of a postwar painting, *Descent from the Cross* (1947). There, "pain and tears" no longer prevail. Even the close-up, intimate scale of the painting lends it a human warmth lacking in the vast pogrom scene of *White Crucifixion*. Raïssa's particular interest in *Descent from the Cross* is the bird's head that Chagall has given to the man who is carrying Christ down from the cross. The bird's head is not an element of caricature, she says, or "a disrespectful whim" on the part of the painter. It is an emblem of the "peaceful purity" of "innocent beings." "And in truth, did a bird not have to be there, in spite of the painter himself?" she asks rhetorically at the end of the section.<sup>14</sup>

Raïssa appears to have seen the animal as God's creature, a peace offering to the martyred Christ and through him to his persecuted people. For Chagall, the human figure with an animal head may well mark the hybrid nature of the scene represented in this descent from the cross; perhaps the composite figure is a reference to the unfulfilled sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham rather than the aftermath of a crucifixion. Certainly Chagall professed no dogmatic religion, a fact Raïssa alludes to elsewhere in the essay.<sup>15</sup> Nonetheless, in her view this painting is the ultimate visual representation of Christ's entry into history: a descent from the cross inaugurating the new law of love and fulfilling the prophecy of a messiah for the Jewish people.

### *Meticulous Testimony*

Despite the obvious fervor of Raïssa's testimony—which may be the best word to designate the genre of her essay—she did not reduce

---

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 114–15.

<sup>15</sup>Ibid., 82.

Chagall's work to theology in images. She read his pictures very idiosyncratically, but remained meticulous in her respect for the "intrinsic value of painting, which is to be good painting," not to exhibit "extrinsic merits" such as "a worthy subject or an interesting story."<sup>16</sup> She did not appropriate Chagall, as I believe her detractors thought she did; rather, she experienced his work imagistically, matching the visual references he provided with the very resonant ones she carried within herself. This is analogous to the process Chagall described when Sweeney asked him to explain his paintings: "I don't understand them at all. They are not literature. [Or, as he might just as well have said: 'They are not theology or philosophy.'] They are only pictorial arrangements of images which obsess me."<sup>17</sup>

Chagall's now famous painting *Solitude* (1933), and the lesser-known *Martyr* (1939), provide almost uncanny demonstrations of the power of images, for him and for Raïssa. Both these paintings are included among the seven illustrations in the first edition of *Marc Chagall*. (The other five are a view of Chagall's native town of Vitebsk painted in 1914, one of the engravings from the *La Fontaine Fables* series [1924–31] and one from the Bible illustrations [1931–39], a happy nuptials scene called *The Three Candles* [1938], and a self-portrait which the artist had just completed [1943].) Raïssa's choice of *Solitude* and *Martyr* is particularly revealing, in view of the wealth of her compatriot's works available to her. The Chagall family's departure from Europe had not been precipitous. They had left Paris in 1939 for the south of France, where they settled into the small Provençal hill town of Gordes. When they did leave the country, by way of Lisbon in May 1941, they shipped or brought along hundreds of Chagall's drawings and paintings, including many of the Paris scenes done during his first stay there before World War I. Yet Raïssa chose *Solitude*, a very Jewish picture, and a depiction of a Christ figure.

In *Solitude*, two figures in white are depicted in close-up view. One is a pensive rabbi wearing the kittel, the over-garment symbolizing purity and worn during the fast at Yom Kippur. The praying rabbi holds a Torah marked with the star of David in his arms. The other

---

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 78.

<sup>17</sup>Sweeney, *Marc Chagall*, 7.

figure is a peaceable cow who appears to be watching over him. A violin is placed by the cow's chin, as if at any moment she will take up the bow and play a song to comfort her sorrowful companion. The ceremonial garment and prayerful position of the rabbi emphasize the spiritual side of his being and his nearness to God; the cow kneeling beside him, attentive but not visible to him, signals his corporeal side and the painful joys of human life. A white angel flying over the human figure and the benign animal completes the triangular composition of the painting. As an emblem of death, she signals the non-corporeal state awaiting the rabbi. Her scale is smaller than that of the other two figures, and she is behind them, out of their line of vision. This may indicate distance, or it may suggest that to Jews in 1933, God's messengers were not much in evidence.

Chagall completed this painting in 1933 and kept it for thirty years, before finally giving it to the Art Museum of Tel Aviv, after the formation of the modern state of Israel. Raïssa ascribes to *Solitude* the highest and rarest merit, calling it "among the most beautiful [pictures] in modern painting."<sup>18</sup> For the painter who could not part with this canvas and the poet who felt its worth would never age,<sup>19</sup> beauty inhered in the painting itself, not in any idea or dogma it might convey. For Chagall, *Solitude* surely taps into childhood memories of pious rabbis in their prayer shawls and of cows killed by his grandfather, a ritual slaughterer. In his memoirs, recalling his boyhood sympathy for the animals at the moment of their death, he addresses "the little cow, naked and crucified": "[Y]ou are dreaming in heaven," he comforts her. "The glittering knife has raised you to the skies."<sup>20</sup> In *Solitude*, the cow may be a surrogate sacrificial figure—young and innocent like Isaac, she awaits deliverance through divine intervention. Perhaps Chagall did not "understand" the pairing of the white animal and the white-shawled rabbinical figure in this painting; I think it more likely that his understanding surpassed the reaches of discourse.

In *Martyr*, the simple composition and spiritual balm of the earlier painting give way to chaos and destruction. At the center of *Martyr*, a man in a short tunic and a peasant's cap is bound to a narrow upright

---

<sup>18</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Chagall ou l'orage enchanté*, 98.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>20</sup>Marc Chagall, *My Life*, trans. Dorothy Williams from the French by Bella Chagall, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965; orig. Russian edit., 1922), 20.

beam. His eyes are closed and his head is inclined to one side. A demurely robed woman leans gently against his bound legs and touches him with her hand. Around him are the signs of disorder and inversion that recur in Chagall's work from the years around World War II—burning houses, people and animals falling from the sky, a mother clutching her child, a figure with a horse's head and a man's torso and a Sabbath lamp for a foot, a lone violinist playing in the street, with no one to hear his music. Unlike the concentrated palette of deep blue-greens and dominant whites in *Solitude*, the riot of competing colors, the ominous blacks and screaming oranges in *Martyr*, echo the horror of war, which is the explicit subject of the painting.

*Profoundly Jewish and Inherently Christian*

At the center of the canvas is a typical Chagallian Christ figure. As is characteristic in the artist's depictions, the Christ is shown in the striped tallis, with the phylacteries mimicking ropes that bind his arms to a vertical beam. There is no crosspiece; instead, broad streaks of light trace an inverted V at the bottom of the canvas, suggesting a reflection of crossbeams. This is a very Jewish martyr, suffering with his people. He is not the impaled, bleeding messiah of a sometimes lurid Christian iconographic tradition. Like the figure in *Descent from the Cross*, this one appears to be tranquil, even meditative. In painting after painting over several decades, Chagall depicts such a Christ, sometimes with arms outstretched, almost always clothed in the striped tallis, a ritual garment of prayer. A permanent figure in the repertoire of Chagall's imagination, this Christ appears in his work in many media, including, for example, the monotypes from the 1960s and the Lincoln Center murals from the 1970s. Raïssa, of course, did not see the continuing variants of the martyr figure which, like their predecessors in his work, Chagall depicted as profoundly Jewish. The dozens that she did see before her death in 1960, she interpreted as profoundly Jewish *and* inherently Christian. In her eyes, their heroic suffering signified their martyrdom for the salvation of a people.

It seems ironic that Raïssa could respond wholeheartedly to the outpouring of resonant images in Chagall's work, yet offer no such wealth in her own. With a few notable exceptions, the language of her poetry and her spiritual journal is narrow and conventional. When she ventures outside the commonplace Christian emblems of water and doves and ships as wayfaring souls seeking safe harbor, she

offers glimpses of a less censored imagination; in poems such as “*Le Lac*,” “*Mirages*,” “*Le Revenant*,” “*Nocturne*,” and, of course, the title piece from *Chagall ou l’orage enchanté*, the poet who loved Chagall exhibits an almost Chagallian transformation of images. On the whole, however, she does not develop a poetic diction or range of metaphor in the way that Chagall builds up a distinctive visual vocabulary. Whether this circumstance indicates a lack of inventiveness on her part or some other more willed resistance, I am not certain. I think that her potential for writing vigorous poetry diminished as she invested more and more energy in contemplation. She herself stated categorically that “too much inventiveness” in language is not desirable in poetry or prose concerned with “the truth of spiritual things.”<sup>21</sup> Elsewhere I have written at length of this restraint in her poetic language,<sup>22</sup> and will not repeat myself here.

What Raïssa referred to as Chagall’s “images of indestructible Israel” were in a deep and personal way the images of hope that she rarely elaborated in her own work, but kept alive in her contemplative life. For her they were also images of faith in deliverance from the bondage of the material world and the flesh through the agency of Christ. Not least of all, they were images of love for God’s creation. Chagall has had more artful praise, but none more heartfelt.

---

<sup>21</sup>Raïssa Maritain, *Les Grandes Amitiés* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949), 110.

<sup>22</sup>Judith D. Suther, *Raïssa Maritain: Pilgrim, Poet, Exile* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1990), 65–99, 118–20, 130–35, 207.